

Which Side Are You On? Community Workers In, Against And *For* The State

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In the last few years the state has taken on the appearance of a battlefield, with cuts in state expenditure, struggles against the cuts, more and more strikes in the public sector, battles against 'scroungers', and sharpening conflicts between state, workers and those who try to 'manage' them. (LEWRG 1980, 62)

One could be forgiven for assuming that these lines from *In and Against the State* were written today for, without doubt, the ostensible parallels between these and current events are clear. I say ostensible because, published in 1980, these words are conveying a state of affairs, and relationship with the state, which is very different to that in which community workers find themselves today.

Using the original publication as my main point of reference, I will examine the relevance of the 'in and against the state' argument for today's community worker. Essentially, this argument highlights the ambivalent nature of the role of the community worker, given its intermediary position between the state and community. This article will explore the extent to which the tensions this produces still exist and will examine whether the adoption of an anti-state position might be a relevant concern for community workers today.

I will begin by briefly outlining the analysis as put forward in *In and Against the State*, examining the ways in which aspects of this argument resonate in the current context, and focusing in particular on the community worker's relationship with the state as a financial resource and the state as a source of policy. Following this, I will explore some significant changes in the political and economic context which call into

question the relevance of the argument, namely the rise of neoliberalism, austerity policies and the appropriation of community development rhetoric by the UK government.

Having explored the ways in which the current context differs from that in which the argument was advanced, I will assess its continuing relevance for today's community worker. I will assert that, though theoretically useful, the argument is practically unhelpful and potentially detrimental to current practice. Rather than adopting an anti-state stance, it is more useful to try to conserve the parts of the state that we need and to find spaces in policy which allow the community worker to support 'new forms of social and political expression' (Shaw 2011, 143).

The analysis put forward in the original book was one to which many community workers at the time related. It highlighted the contradictory nature of the relationship between the community worker and the capitalist state, carrying particular weight with those 'radical' community workers who aimed to tackle the root causes, rather than the symptoms, of social problems. The argument arose at a time when increased state-sponsorship resulted in a somewhat contradictory situation for workers: they found themselves struggling for the transformation of the unjust capitalist society whilst working for the very structures which they viewed as responsible for its propagation (LEWRG 1980). Written from a socialist perspective, it argued that state-sponsored workers must support 'effective, organised oppositional action' (LEWRG 1980, 2) against the essential oppressiveness of the state, a state which often rendered the community worker complicit in its domination of the working class. I will now look at some issues, namely the tensions surrounding funding and policy, which continue to result in conflict with the state.

The relationship between the community worker and the state has changed in many ways since the publication of *In and Against the State*. One thing that endures, however, is the financial dependence of many community workers on the state. Whether working for a local council or in the voluntary sector, the state often remains the sole or major source of funding. At a time of austerity, when the interests of the

community and the state seem to be increasingly at odds, these financial ties continue to be a major source of tension. Moreover, the extent to which funding regimes dictate the work that can be carried out has increased. In other words, not only are state-sponsored workers being funded by a system which is often the cause of the problems with which they are dealing, but by accepting this funding, the possibilities for discussing the root causes are fast disappearing. In an environment where funding is increasingly contingent on outcomes, and the process of acquisition more gruelling, there is simultaneously less room to maneuver and more funding-related work to do.

The state, as holder of the financial keys at a time when increased competition for funding wields a great deal of power over the community worker. For the community worker who is trying to challenge some aspects of the state from which she or he receives funding, tensions are substantial and, in many cases, more pronounced than thirty years ago. I will come to this later when addressing issues of austerity and 'The Big Society'.

Another reason that the 'in and against the state' argument still carries weight is the conflict between policy and the scope for practice in community work. This issue is of course intertwined with that of state funding, but it presents its own contradictions. One of the main points made in *In and Against the State* was that policy can be the realisation of 'the potential of the state for constructing or reinforcing the very problem which community development is deployed to resolve' (Shaw 2011, 139). One aspect of this reinforcement is the representation of groups and individuals in policy. As was asserted in 1980, 'many of the working class seem to be identified by the state as 'irresponsible', as 'troublemakers', 'scroungers' (LEWRG 1980, 9). Representations of individuals and communities as somehow 'deficient' or 'undeserving' have not diminished since Michael Katz stated that '[t]he vocabulary of poverty impoverishes political imagination' (1989, 3). This vocabulary often infiltrates policy and dictates the solutions that can be selected by community workers, meaning that their role continues to be informed, and often constrained, by government policy.

Discourses which generally present what Mills (1957) calls 'public issues' as the 'personal troubles' of individuals or communities, present a view of the world which holds communities accountable for matters which are often beyond their control. When faced with putting policy into practice, the community worker is encouraged to address symptoms rather than causes of problems and has, for this reason, 'been instrumental in both support of and challenge to dominant elites' (Poppo and Shaw 1997, 194). A continuing dilemma is the generation of policy 'from above in order to solve current problems rather than from below in response to needs', as workers must 'strike a balance between the demands of policy and the interests of communities in ways that are not easily resolvable' (Tett 2010, 31). The curtailment of scope for transformational, as opposed to adaptive, practice continues to be apparent in the contemporary context. Moreover, these tensions, rooted in the community worker's relationship with policy and resources, have not merely persisted, they have become increasingly pronounced. I will now look at some of the changes which have paved the way for this.

Given the similarities between the conflicts within the contemporary context and that in which the original analysis was carried out, there is a great temptation to overstate the relevance of the argument for today's community worker. As Shaw acknowledges, '[t]hese tensions remain central, not peripheral, to our contemporary concerns. However, the earlier formation now needs to be modified to take account of the particularities of context' (2011, 139). The 'particularities' of today's context stem, for the most part, from the substantial changes that have been made to the ideological, political and economic landscape since 1979. These changes call into question how relevant being 'against' the state is for community workers today.

In 1980, one year after its initial publication, *In and Against the State* was republished to incorporate details of the 'new mode of domination' which arose following Margaret Thatcher's election (LEWRG 1980, 113). Central to this 'mode', which Michael Sandel referred to as '[t]he most fateful change that unfolded during the last three decades', was 'the expansion of markets, and of market values, into spheres of life where they don't belong' (2012, 7). This neoliberal agenda, which championed

privatisation and deregulation, began with Thatcher but has been on the rise ever since. Advocates forwarded the notion that a liberalisation of the market and trade would guarantee individual freedoms, and so 'the laws of the market [began to] take precedence over laws of the state as guardians of the public good' (Giroux 2003, 57). The infiltration of modern political life with neoliberal values has had a significant impact upon what Goeghegan and Powell call 'politicised' community development, 'a form of politics whereby citizens participate in civil society through communicative action in order to directly socialize policy issues' (2009, 444&431). As both successes and failures are portrayed as the result of an individual's behaviour, the connections between root cause and symptoms have been further obscured, and an understanding of problems as rooted in social structures has become increasingly counterintuitive.

When the revised edition of *In and Against the State* was published, Thatcher had 'pledged to cut back drastically on the role that the state plays in [the people's] daily lives' (LEWRG 1980, 116). According to Hall (2011), this 'neoliberal narrative' painted the welfare state as mistaken in its attempts to intervene in the economy, redistribute wealth, ameliorate 'the condition of oppressed or marginalised groups' and address social injustice. Since Thatcher's election, the permeation of modern life by neoliberal values has assisted a decline in the perceived importance of collective social responsibility, sanctioning the gradual retraction of the welfare state. Without doubt, the rise in market-oriented values and roll-back of the welfare state has and will continue to alter the relationship between community worker and the state. Before I address this issue, I will briefly explore how austerity and the big society have further altered the relationship between the two.

As a profession [community development] was created as a means of managing or mediating the relationship between the state and its population, particularly in circumstances of crisis here and abroad (Shaw 2008, 13).

In response to the so-called economic crisis in 2007, the UK government has

proposed the most far-reaching cuts to the welfare state since its foundation (Taylor-Gooby 2011). Alongside these proposed changes has come an increase in the appropriation, by the UK government, of language traditionally used to define the goals of radical community development. This language, which represented a desire for redistribution of power, has been simultaneously appropriated and stripped of its critical roots. Confusingly, Cameron's concept of 'The Big Society' is centered on the rhetoric of 'democracy', 'empowerment', 'participation' and 'community'. Unsurprisingly, the government's plans for 'empowerment' are bestowing cuts, not power, and responsibility, not 'participatory democracy' (Ledwith 2011, 25-6). So in some ways, austerity and the idea of 'The Big Society' are just a continuation of the neoliberal agenda, with the labelling of individuals and communities as both problem and solution. Today the community has, yet again, been called upon 'to mop up the ill effects of the market', as Levitas states, 'and to provide the conditions for its continued operation, while the costs of this are borne by individuals rather than the state' (2000, 94).

With the community worker in an already unprecedented situation, Cameron revealed more changes, namely the 'presumption' that public services would now be open to 'any willing provider' (Cameron 2011). Adding privatisation into the mix of competitive tendering and new managerialism makes the position of the community worker ever more complex. There is not the space here to delve further into these issues, but raising them perhaps serves to illustrate the increasing complexity of the relationship between the community worker and the state. Having briefly explored some ways in which the community worker's relationship to the state has both changed and remained the same, I will now assess whether the position of being 'in and against the state' is appropriate in the current context for, as Craig says, '[a]n appraisal of the tasks which community development has to face...can only be effective if it is based on an accurate analysis of the ideological, political and economic context within which it is operating' (Craig 1998, 14).

There are many differences between the current context and that in which the original argument was made. Some of these differences, namely the rise of neoliberalism,

austerity policies and the appropriation of community development rhetoric, have put the community worker in an increasingly difficult position. As Shaw and Martin note, before acknowledging its shortcomings, ‘in terms of its explanatory force and the coherence of its analysis, [it] remains as convincing as ever’ (2000, 404), but how helpful is it in today’s practice?

The rise of the neoliberal agenda, and the austerity policies for which it has paved the way, are further complicating the relationship between the state and community workers, who are now forced to defend the very thing they’d once fought against. As Shaw highlights, ‘in a context in which the state has been so deeply colonized by the market, it becomes paramount also to work *for* the state’ (2011, 139), to acknowledge that the state is itself a contradictory system, with aspects that can be used to both enhance and oppress democracy. With the whittling away of notions of collectivity and, with them, the welfare state, standing against the state could prove to be of greater detriment than good.

What seems to be more important, given the current context, is that we ‘step back and gain some critical distance’ (Emejulu and Shaw 2010, 6). The appropriation by the government of the ‘language of democracy’ is proving to be a challenge, but also an opportunity. As Foucault asserts,

...a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy...[D]iscourse...undermines and exposes [power], renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart(1998: 100-1).

In light of this, instead of taking a stance against state policy, it could be more beneficial to seek to repoliticise it, to use the state’s rhetoric of democracy to create spaces for true democratic action.

What seems to be imperative is the preservation of an awareness of the multifaceted

and complex nature of the state as well as the dialectical position that one must adopt in practice. Ultimately, being anti-state could serve to diminish the ability of the community worker to 'believe in the efficacy and legitimacy of their work' leading to a view of themselves 'as the victims rather than the agents of their own marginality' (Shaw and Martin 2000: 405).

In 1980 the writers of *In and Against the State* emphasised that 'our struggle against [the state] must be a continual one, changing shape as the struggle itself, and the state's response to it, create new opportunities' (LEWRG 1980, 79). Without doubt, the role of the community worker will not be free from struggle with the state, but rather than focusing solely on this, time should be spent developing skills of critical analysis, adaptability and creativity. Developing these skills, in the context of 'Austerity Britain', should support the realisation of what Shaw asserts is community work '[a]t its best...a continuing search for new forms of social and political expression in response to new forms of social and political control' (2011: 143). In engaging with the modern state, then, the community worker must look *within* the state and its policies, and find opportunities to repoliticise the discourses of democracy which are pervasive in political life today.

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